

# **The Hunt**

**Ayrith**

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# Summary

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## Description:

On the eve of the Hunt Festival, two old friends meet. Freya is still looking for Fratley. Zidane is still a hopeless skirt chaser. But this time, a few things are different.

# Chapter 1

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**Disclaimer:** This story is a revamp of in-game events with a twist. Due to the nature of this plot, some of the dialogue is directly translated or inspired from dialogue in the game and is not mine. Nothing is mine but my love for this game.

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## The Hunt

Freya didn't know what compelled her to sign up for the Hunting Tournament every year.

It certainly wasn't fond memories, as she distinctly remembered being knocked out within the first ten minutes of her very first hunt. The next two years, she had lost horribly to Fratley, not having caught on then that two or three dire wolves weren't worth a quarter of a Zagnol's hide. The next four times, she had lost because Fratley wasn't there and she'd kept running down empty alleyways thinking he was. These days, the tournament had become less spectacle and more dreadful chore, another rote she would endure during the passing of the season.

She had thought about signing up last minute this year because she hoped Fratley would come *this time* (*this time*, always *this time* in her thoughts), but that's not what ended up happening. *This time* she had been half way drunk last night when some lunker at Bobo's had questioned her capabilities. Stupidly, she had signed the paper *before* wiping the floor with his face. And the counters. And the floor again, when he bloodied it up. Now if she didn't win the tournament, Bobo would indenture her for imperiling his business in the act of defending her honor. As it was, he was her "sponsor" and she'd have to say some crappy "I get my beer at Bobo's!" line when she accepted the cup. It didn't help that his wife had taken a shining to that sparkler they were touting as one of the awards.

So here she was sitting at a bar in the middle of Lindblum staring darkly into a glass of water and wondering how her life had gotten here. It didn't bode well for Burmecia if one of her Dragoons could be pinned by a death stare from a portly man with tomato sauce in his mustache on the other side of the bar.

Molly, his new serving girl, brushed Freya's coat tails as she flitted by. She was wearing an atrocious dress with large ruffled fabric at the shoulders and a

long green skirt clearly *not* designed for Burmecian ladies with large feet. It was for some island inspired theme Bobo had concocted to get more customers through the door. When Freya caught Bobo staring at her pointedly, she shuddered and returned to her water. She *had* to win the tournament.

Then she sighed.

Truth be told, she had haunted the *Doom Pub* for many years. Bobo had seen the worst in her—and more of the worst of her, actually. The fact he was threatening only to make her work as a serving girl was probably more than she deserved, because he knew what happened when she got one too many *Fireballs* in her. He still served them to her, though, even knowing it would lead to trouble, because he had some inkling or instinct as to why she kept showing up the nineteenth day of the first month every year.

She felt shame, some days, that she was so transparent in her pain. But most days she didn't care that she was flashing old scars, if only for the comfort that some things never changed; the same greeting, the same banter, the same drink and glass to drown herself in.

Well, she'd gotten an early start yesterday. She'd have to suffice with cold sobriety this time around.

Freya looked down at the chilled water in her hands. The cup was in an old style, patterned in geometric shapes and had the cloudy quality of stained glass. It reminded her of the ruined basilicas that spotted the Cleyran desert, ancient stone structures that had once been a place of Burmecian worship before a religious divide a thousand years ago had kicked up the sand storm. She had spent many years wrapped in desert linen and finding shelter in those abandoned halls, picking her way across floors littered with colored glass like painted rainbows. There was quiet presence in those ruins, tamed by the sand storms that blew continually through, like memories and regrets present but buried beneath piles of silt. Sometimes, she would catch herself dreaming of happier times, and the glass would always glitter and fade around her like a prolonged wink.

When Fratley had first left, she had turned to the deserts first because he had loved the ruins even as he despised their emptiness, the remainder of a history eroding and forgotten. She, who loved the grey fields of the burmecian plains, the overflowing streams, the sound of running water on stone, spent



horrible nights listening to the piercing wind behind broken walls and wondering what mystique, if any, Fratley sensed here. What wonder lay anywhere beyond the Burmecian borders, a microcosm of its own with grasslands, mountains and trees. Nothing could replace the pitter-patter of rain as her lullaby, but she listened and tried to understand. For him, she always had.

As children, Fratley had always been five steps ahead of her. He'd learned to walk first, her crawling after him, face full of baby distress. He'd left for academy as she struggled through the primary education he had flown through, and had become a squire when she had finally, begrudgingly been accepted as a page. As a child, she didn't remember a time where she hadn't been chasing him.

And now she was chasing him again.

Lips thinning, Freya took a sip of her water and slammed the glass on the bar. Bobo flicked his eyes to her but she stared resolutely behind the bar, at the poster dangling on the wall with her name like chicken scratch at the bottom.

So, the Hunt. Signing that paper had been stupid.

There was a grunt as someone slumped into the barstool beside her. A machinist, from the smell of oil and the grease on his hands and face. Freya didn't look up, even when he glanced at her and snorted at the water in her hands.

"Special day?" he asked wryly, flagging Bobo for several beers.

If by "special" he meant the day half her soul walked away, never to return? "Very," she said quietly.

He grunted, taking the hint at her tone, and turned away from her to enjoy his beers. Her fists clenched slightly against the glass.

She didn't need some random bastard living it up in the *Doom Pub* judging what she did and why she did it. She slanted a glare at her neighbor. This guy probably lived in his parent's basement and worked at some construction site two blocks from his house. He'd probably never been out of the city for more than a month, had never weathered the desert or hiked up the northern mountains or faced near death at the hands of any number of creatures. He didn't know what it meant at sixteen to have the only person who had ever believed in her disappear and leave her to fend for herself against teachers and

classmates who'd only tolerated her at best, and at worst...

Only then did she notice the guy was awkwardly hunched over his drinks as far from her as possible.

*Reis's* tit, she needed a beer too. There was a reason she made an effort to be drunk today. And if she couldn't get one here she was going to find the next nearest pub, purchase a keg, and dunk her head in it. It didn't matter if Bobo was now giving her pitying looks. She raised her glass to her lips, suddenly wishing for the scent of rain.

The bar door opened with a loud clatter. "Yo Pops, I'll have the stupid special."

Freya paused mid swallow. That sounded familiar. She turned slightly to the door.

A young man strode in, swagger on full blast. Knee-worn trousers and a threadbare vest told her he worked and slept in his clothes; the pair of nice looking daggers perched on his hip spoke of traveling. That arrogant smile on his baby face and the way he whistled at the server girl made her just want to punch him in the head. But it was the twitching furry tail that twined like a serpent behind him that made her return to her drink, lips pursed,

and forget all about her plans to drown in a sea of alcohol.

Well, well. He was still alive, was he?

He looked different. Part of her expected to turn around and see that scrawny adolescent boasting about his latest catch on the streets of Treno and inevitably getting the tar beat out of him for it. She remembered how she'd passed him on the bridge the first time, thinking he was just another unlucky kid sucked into the underbelly of the streets, always in the wrong place at the wrong time. Then he'd come sauntering into the same café sporting a black eye like a badge, hounding the waitress with quick hands and the most obnoxious pick up lines imaginable. She'd felt like it was her divine duty to knock further sense into him and be blessed forevermore by all womankind.

Much like she did right now, actually.

“—you’ve never seen Lindblum from above? It’s pretty mind blowing. Would you like that?” Zidane was saying, trying to cajole Molly closer with that crooked grin. Unfortunately, it seemed like time had made it far more effective.

Freya set her cup down, disgusted. “Hey, monkey-tail. I’m pretty sure your mother just rolled in her grave with that one.”

Zidane looked up. Those icy blue eyes met hers and for the tiniest of seconds her breath caught in her throat. Well damn. It looked like he’d finally grown into all that overly excessive charm.

Then those eyes looked her up and down and she just wanted to punch him again. He smirked. “Monkey-tail? I’m pretty sure you’ve got a tail too, sweetheart.”

Freya surveyed her cup. “Sweetheart? Hmm. I’m going to finish this drink here, then I’m going to kick your ass, *sweetheart*.”

From the other side of the bar, Bobo slapped down his hand towel. “Zidane!” he barked. “Stop disturbing the customers.”

Zidane waved a hand, smiling. “No worries, pops.” Waitress forgotten, he sauntered over to the remaining open seat to Freya’s left and swung into it. He reclined in it like a throne, those icy hooded eyes flicking over her. He was grinning like a fool. It was all she could do to keep sipping her water and not roll her eyes.

“Been awhile, Zidane,” she said instead. Because it really had been if he’d turned into... *this*.

Zidane scratched his head. “Uh yeah, it has... uhh...”

She stared at him. He put a finger to his head in an exaggerated thinking pose.

“Martha?” At her glare, he waved his hands. “No? No, of course not. Sorry, you’re... Helga, right?”

“Wrong,” she deadpanned.

He playfully hit his head. “Silly me. It’s Rachel. It is, right? I just didn’t recognize you, is all. You’re kinda... uh... different.”

She was reaching for a nearby butter knife when he laughed and intercepted her hand. “Chill out, Freya!” His palms were callused. She didn’t remember that, or the way the sound of her name made her feel suddenly warm.

“You’re an idiot,” she told him.

“True enough.” He wrapped both his hands around hers, grinning and leaned forward with a conspiratorial wink. “But I’d never forget *you*.” He rubbed her knuckle with his thumb, causing an odd

sensation to flit up her arm. When she moved to jab him with an elbow he let go, holding both hands up in surrender, still smiling infuriatingly.

Freya really didn't remember this. She also didn't remember what it was like to be flirted with. Or what it felt like to enjoy it.

As she stared at him, Zidane stretched, yawning and turned to the barkeep. "Hey Pops. Where's my special? I ordered it years ago."

Bobo whistled. Everyone at the bar lifted their glasses and Bobo slid a soup dish from the far end of the bar. It stopped with perfect precision in front of Zidane. He looked at it, frowning. "Hey! Where's the—" He caught the bread thrown at his face.

"You're the best!" he called, grinning. Bobo muttered and went back to wiping glasses. Molly giggled and Zidane threw her another flirtatious wink. Freya shook her head.

"I guess you haven't changed *that* much..." she said, returning to her glass.

Zidane snorted around a mouthful of soup. "Freya, I'm a changed man. No longer that dumb kid who couldn't win the fights that he got in."

“That you started, you mean,” Freya corrected. When he just grinned shamelessly, she continued, “Well that’s a relief. I’m sure Helga, Rachel and Martha will be pleased.”

Zidane pointed his spoon at her. “Still on that? Come on, you know I was joking.” His grin turned crooked. “*You’re* the one I want to please.”

Freya ignored those eyes... and that mouth, which was still corny as hell but somehow less amusing at the moment. “Aren’t you sixteen?” she said flatly.

Zidane puffed his chest, clearly pleased with himself and of course missing her point by leagues. “Eighteen. Legit and everything.” His eyes flicked to Bobo who was heading towards a nearby customer and his expression turned sly. “Bars gotta kick me out for other reasons now.”

“Not hard to find one,” Bobo muttered in passing and Zidane stuck his tongue at him.

For *Reis’s* sake... Freya fixated on the tournament poster instead. “Wonderful. Hey,” she nudged him, “You gonna be in that?” She nodded her head towards it.



Zidane squinted his eyes. “Oh that? Nah. Too much of a hassle.”

“Lazy and an idiot,” she said, shaking her head.

“Hey now,” he said, “I’m a busy man. Things to do, places to see, people to help.” The way he grinned to himself at that last part made her pause.

She eyed him. “Getting into trouble again?”

“Never,” he mocked, then his expression turned contemplative. ‘It’s been a hell of a week though. I’m looking forward to a real bed, was getting sick of sleeping on the ground.’ He scratched his head. “It’s not been so bad. New sights, pleasant company. At least some of them.” He took another mouthful of soup.

“I see.” Her last few weeks trekking alone in the mountains seemed positively staid in comparison. Freya looked at the poster again. “Well, I’ll be in it.”

“Yeah?” Zidane swallowed. “You’re in it like every year though, aren’t you? Which reminds me... did you ever find that boyfriend of yours?”

Freya stilled. “...No.”

Zidane scratched his head again. He had the decency to look sheepish. “I see... well, I’m sure

you'll find him someday."

Freya said nothing. They sat in silence for a long while, him eating his soup and her drinking her water. Eventually, he asked, "How's Burmecia?"

She rubbed the top of her glass with a finger. "Wouldn't know. Got banished, remember?" It didn't matter. *There is nothing there for me anymore.*

"Oh." He grimaced, and then sighed. "Sometimes I don't know what to say to you, Freya."

That surprised her. It... stung. She looked down, wondering when she'd got so soft. "Wow. You've become a real charmer, monkey brains."

He seemed to realize his mistake. He slouched over the bar, trying to look up at her through her bangs. His eyes flicked between hers. "Sorry. That didn't come out right." He sounded apologetic.

She avoided his gaze. "It's fine." It probably stung because it was true.

"I didn't mean it as an insult to you." He was leaning in so close she could see the blue cornflower flecks in his irises—and those eyeballs were invasive! "You're amazing. I only meant that I

always bring up the wrong stuff. I'd rather make you laugh."

Okay. Was this an apology? Cause he really needed to stop. "I get it," she deadpanned. She wracked her brain for something to derail him. "Tell me a joke, then."

"A joke?" He sat up, stroking his chin. "Okay. Here's a great one. What kind of pick-up line does a Burmecian like?"

"You know what? Never mind. I don't want to hear it."

"The cheesy kind." he nudged, grinning. "Cheesy. Get it?"

She shook her head. "That was... no."

"You're smiling," he pointed out.

"Because I am amused at your idiocy."

"Suuuure. As long as you keep smiling."

She rolled her eyes. "Zidane, please. This..." *flirting*, but the word refused to leave her mouth "... act doesn't work on me. I was there, if you recall, that one time you tried to schmooze a kiss out of a

shop keeper's daughter and got shot with an arrow in the a—”

He clapped a hand over her mouth, face beat red. “Ehehe... what are you talking about?” He flashed a smile at a nearby patron.

She moved to kick him but he jumped off his stool, tail dancing.

“Do that again and I will stab you,” she threatened.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, shrugging her off. He slid back on the stool and resumed eating his bread. “But just so you know, you’ve got some pretty outdated info on me. The world can change a man and I’ve seen quite a bit since we last met up.”

“Really,” Freya said dryly, putting a hand to her head. Suddenly, she had a strong urge for a drink.

Zidane slapped his bread on the table. “Don’t believe me? Fine. Prepare yourself, cause now I have to prove it to you. There was this one time I was on this fishing boat off the coast—”

Freya thumped her forehead against the bar. “Telling me a story does not prove anything,” she said wearily. “And frankly, I really should be

going.” There was a keg with her name on it somewhere...

Zidane patted her back. “Ahh, where is your sense of imagination? Clearly, you are far too sober. Hey Pops, give the lady a drink, would ya?”

Yeah right. Bobo wouldn’t—

Clink. She felt cold glass against her hand. She looked up to see the old barkeep walking away with a shake of his head and Zidane grinning down at her. “You’ve been wanting one, right? I remember.” He jostled the mug at her, beer sloshing within. His eyes were bluer than any of those desert skies. “Stay with me. I promise I won’t bore you.”

Freya stared at him, feeling an odd flush up her neck. She didn’t know what to say to that or what to think of it. Or even if she should think of it.

But she stayed.

## Chapter 2

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Author's Note: We are doing a FF9 replay again, which means finally time to dive back in and revive plans for Freya and Zidane what-if shenanigans.

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Stone cold sobriety was nine times out of ten an overrated experience. As the evening wore on however, Freya began to wonder if she should have stuck with the water.

Simply put, Zidane was a monster.

Said man was currently leaning into her over a cement bartop, his arm completely ignoring her personal bubble as he used her as a leaning post while flagging down a greasy barman. Aside from the slight red around his ears and that stupid grin on his face, it would have been impossible to tell that he should be *had to be*-five tankards away from an alcoholic's early grave.

Even if one *could* tell, it wouldn't have mattered; their fourth bar of the night was the diviest, shadiest drinking establishment Freya had ever had the

misfortune to patron. Someone could stagger in and pass out on the floor and no one would bat an eye if moonshine was poured straight down their gullet.

Quietly, Freya mourned the death of her easy evening. She should have known better when they'd been forced to quit the Doom Pub earlier by the third round of drinks, after Zidane was halfway into cajoling Molly into ditching her shift. Bobo had chased the idiot out and then with an apologetic look, sent the Burmecian out too.

By then Freya had been nicely buzzed and ready to retire to her room at the Lindblum Drag and Pony to curl up into a ball on the too soft mattress. But Zidane had had other ideas.

Clearly the alcohol had gone straight to her head if she'd forgotten how very little she liked Zidane's ideas.

The literal hole in the wall he'd dragged her to was overcrowded, loud, and smelled like sweat, belligerence, overcompensation and not enough alcohol. The bar top was a parade of every drunken species stereotype imaginable, from pirates in ridiculous hats to shaft workers sooty from the mines. It was also terribly packed. She'd been forced to shoulder her way with much shoving between

Zidane and a giant green skinned bannga with arms the size of cannons. When the man had grunted at her to fuck off, she'd been prepared to cut out his tongue but settled for staring at him with dead fish eyes until he sneered and returned to his drinks.

After that display (and likely because she was the only breathing female for miles, *Reis's* tit what was she even *doing* here), she was beginning to get second looks of an unfortunate nature. This seemed to amuse Zidane immensely though it did not, she noticed with annoyance, hinder him in any way from slinging an arm over her shoulder and leaning close. "Five hundred gil," he snickered into the lapel of her coat, "that some asshole asks you to *get out of here* with him before the end of the night."

"Not everyone is as terrible as you," she told him solemnly, which was made less effective by the fact that his face kept swimming in her vision. Then she sniffed. "Also, at least bet more than a pitance on me, you cheapskate."

Zidane laughed outright. Freya was pleased, until she realized how idiotic that was. She frowned at the bartop. "Perhaps I *should* retire for the evening." Her tongue felt numb in her mouth, never a good sign. "Before I get..."



“Shit-faced?” Zidane guessed. “Piss-drunk? Rat-arsed?”

Her nose wrinkled at that last one. Damn her species’ proclivity for drunken revelry. “Before I get *arrested*, dolt. Don’t think I’ve forgotten your penchant for bedlam and your knack for dragging me into it. You may be a lazybones, but *I* have a Hunt tomorrow.”

Rather than respond, Zidane cocked his head at her, then grinned. Before she could question him, the barkeep appeared and he let go of her, exchanging some coin for six shot glasses filled with bubbling amber liquid. When he slid two glasses to her, that stupid glint still in his eyes, Freya eyed him suspiciously. “What?”

“Nothing,” he said. His eyes crinkled a little. “It’s cute.”

“*Excuse* me?” she gaped, automatically checking herself as if there was a stain on her shirt, and he laughed again.

“I mean the way you talk.” He made a mocking bow of deference. “Like a proper lady knight.”

Freya bit her cheek. The more inebriated she got, the easier it was to lapse into old habits. Her

informative years had been haunted by a series of publicly humiliating reprimands for slipping into the backwater slang of her home village, much to the snickering of her upper echelon classmates. As a consequence, a young Freya had overcompensated by being overly formal, overly prepared, overly everything. It hadn't done her much good once she'd left Burmecia, outsiders already thinking her kind zealous and overly proud, so she'd shortly dropped the airs and the speech patterns if only to be left alone.

Gone were the days of her overly self conscious adolescence; she was older now. And, Freya mused as she took a shot of hard spicy liquor that burned down her throat and straight into her sinuses, Zidane had never been one of those people. She set the glass with a click on the bar and a dry, "*I am* a proper lady knight."

He winked at her, slung back his own shot like water, then stared at the bottles across the bar. "I never noticed before. Reminds me of someone I know."

The shift in mood piqued Freya's interest. Ridiculous tall tales aside, it was the first personal thing he had said all night. "Who?"

He slanted his eyes at her. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

The hint of challenge had her leaning in, tail lashing in irritation. “Try me.”

Zidane mirrored her, propping his chin in his hand. His blue eyes glinted as he whispered conspiratorially, “A princess.” At Freya’s unladylike snort, he smiled. “Told you so.”

She leaned back with a sigh. “All right, fine. Say I believe you.” She ran a thumb over the edge of an empty glass. “She the reason you’ve been mooning all night?”

Her vision wasn’t so addled that she didn’t catch him blinking owlishly at her in the low light, hand falling. “What makes you say that?” he said slowly.

“You’re drinking here with me,” she pointed out, “rather than warming some girl’s bed.”

His eyes turned calculating, looking her up and down. “Who says I won’t be?”

That preposterous deflection might have worked if she’d not caught the barest hint of testiness in his tone.

“Wow.” She whistled low, propping her chin in her hand. Zidane moody over one girl. Wonders never ceased. “The monkey-tail slaying princesses...”

Zidane actually *groaned*. “It wasn’t like that.” At her incredulous look, he rolled his eyes. “She’s sixteen. Even I’m not that much of a scoundrel.” His nose wrinkled at that last word.

Ha. Her condescending pat on his back had him glowering. “I would bet a significant amount of money to the contrary,” she said, then softened the blow by handing him the last of the shots and clinking theirs together. “But cheers for what I assume was a valiant effort of holding back.”

The whiskey scorched down her throat like a runaway brush fire. The moment the liquor hit her stomach, she knew instantly it was one shot too many. The world went hazy for a minute-the glow of the light globes over the bar, a murmur of words as Zidane asked her something, and her nodding. With a pat of the shoulder, Zidane slipped a way for a moment and Freya found herself burrowing her face into her coat sleeve and staring at the scattering of light against the collection of alcohol jars stacked

across the way, like towering columns of stained glass in reds and greens and golds.

The bannga from before was currently giving her a look, previous irritations apparently forgotten. “Special day?” he grunted.

She had a sudden flash of several years back, the Lindblum square in the midst of raucous celebration, banners waving, trumpets blasting and bunches of larkspur, daises and bishop’s lace thrown into the air and dappled with sunlight. Of herself, standing back up on the participant’s stage and admiring the view, and then turning to clap as Sir Fratley Iron-tail stepped into the winner circle wearing a silly ornamental wreath and bowing to receive his prize with all the formality of a knighting.

“Why of course it is,” she muttered into the wood, feeling an odd sense of vertigo and a foreign dark amusement, like throwing oneself off of a cliff headfirst, laughing. She raised an arm in the air, thrusting an invisible spear. “For tomorrow we Hunt!”

The bannga remained unimpressed. He opened his mouth to say something when his eyes flicked up and Freya felt a warm hand land on her shoulder.

With a shrug, the bannga turned back to his companion.

Freya spun, about to ask the owner exactly how attached he was to his appendage, only to realize it was Zidane thrusting a glass of pure, blessed water into her hands. A choir of singing cherubs would not have been out of place in that moment.

“You’re an angel,” she breathed, transgressions forgotten, and then took a big swig of the glass. Her blissful expression had that smile of his sliding as easily over his face as his hand suddenly did shifting to cup her shoulder blade.

“I am, am I?” he asked her as a some seeqs beside them began to cackle at a joke the barkeep made, each guffaw like the rumble of a small earthquake. His grin turned lazy. “I don’t often get accused of being angelic.”

She sighed into her cup, pressing the cool surface against her cheek. “True. You are basically a scoundrel.” She glanced over the rim of her glass at him, feeling warm and reckless. “Though I suppose you’ve got your good points.”

“Oh?” He leaned in, fingers teasing over the ridge of her spine. “And what good points would

those be?”

She was not so drunk that she couldn't reach behind her to grab his wrist and squeeze. “Eternally optimistic, for starters.”

He chuckled, pulling his hands away. “Can't blame me for trying.”

Freya was about to retort something scathing and flattering to neither of them when a group of humans jostled past, drunk out of their minds and laughing uproariously. She had just enough sense to set the water glass on the bar before she found herself shoved directly into Zidane's chest.

The group burst into laughter while one of them whistled at Zidane, “Take care of your pet, eh?”

Freya's vision narrowed predator like on that weasel face. She was about to stalk forward and beat the living hell out of the arsehole for the thousand inconsistencies in his statement when Zidane's arm suddenly looped around her waist, hauling her back against him.

“Whoa there, sweetheart,” he said, loud enough for the last of the humans to turn away with a cackle, “no arrests, remember?” and it was all so very maddening because even though she was Freya

Crescent, chaser of lost lovers, and he was Zidane Tribal, chaser of skirts, she still stiffened, a prickling awareness washing over her at the long stripe of warmth along her back where she notched into him, the band of corded muscle like a belt around her rib cage, and his hot breath blooming pure alcohol against her forehead.

They were the same height now, she realized belatedly. When had that happened?

She swallowed. “Let go of me.”

His chin tucked over her shoulder. “They aren’t worth it, Freya.”

It was just her name, and not said in any particular way, but she rarely heard it these days and never so lowly in her ear. It, coupled with his casual embrace and the alcohol gone to her head, had her spine threatening a shiver and her toes curling, damn traitorous body. Freya bit back a curse even as she relented. She had clearly spent too long alone in the mountains this last time.

“I should kick their arses,” she grumbled, staring at the backs of the humans walking away. Zidane hummed vibrations along her collarbone, and this time she did shiver, tingling spots down her spine,



and there was no possible way he didn't noticed. Embarrassed, she turned her head towards him, hand latching tight onto his wrist where it looped over her hip. "And if you call me *sweetheart* again I'll kick yours too."

She felt more than saw him smile into her hairline, even as his arm slid away. "Kinky. Didn't think you were such a tease."

Hackles raising at his impudence, she turned around to rip into him-big mistake. He was far too close, his eyes liquid warm, and alcohol apparently made her stupid because her heart skipped when he reached up to flick her bangs with a sly, "So... wanna get out of here?"

*Incorrigible.* She stared at him for several seconds, then cleared her throat. "I believe," she said stiffly, wishing she'd bit that finger instead of standing like a doe-eyed virgin, "you owe me five hundred gil, *brat*."

She thought she'd had the last word until he chuckled, depositing a coin into her hand with a smug, "don't spend it all at once," and subsequently making her hurl it right back at his head. Infuriatingly, he merely added it to the tip pile on the bar before herding her towards the exit. She only

went because her knees wobbled when she walked and she wasn't about to stay in this overcrowded dump to be contrary. Together they jostled their way through the crowd and out into the open air.

The night was crisp and cool, sharp enough to sear her lungs in a pleasant way. Unlike Burmecia, whose constant natural rains dissipated the creeping mists, most major settlements of the mist continent were built on higher ground. But even by those standards Lindblum had always stood apart as a city practically built in the sky; it was high enough in altitude that the tips of Lindblum's great airship docks skimmed the clouds. Lindblumers did not need to bolt their doors against the monsters of the dark, but could walk around the streets safely ensconced by technology and nature as if during a clear midday.

Both mist and cloud were invisible right now however, pierced through by a blanket of winking stars, like thousands upon thousands of pale seeds scattered across black, tilled earth. Fuzzy head clearing momentarily, Freya drifted away from the bar entrance into the center of the empty slum street, staring up silently at the open sky above their heads.

“Gorgeous, huh?” Zidane said, moving to stand beside her. His breath fogged in the air in front of them. “It’s even brighter when outside the city lights. Best thing about camping outdoors the last few weeks was having that for a night light.”

Freya said nothing. She did know. How many mountains had she scaled to find only moonlight and brisk winds to greet her? How many valleys had she laid bed in, with only the stars as company?

But even so, Freya thought as Zidane rubbed his bare arms and then rustled in his pocket for his gloves. The night *was* beautiful. In her weak moments she might look up at the sky and think only of the past, but on nights like this one she was silenced by it’s incalculable vastness. It made the paper maps she had poured over under candle light appear as mere scribbles, the rare metal globes sequestered in the king’s library look like children’s toys.

The sky was not made to carry her dreams. It was not made for her at all. It was hubris to think otherwise.

Freya sighed. “I’m drunk.”

Zidane looked at her, then grinned. “Gil for your thoughts?”

“Maudlin drivels not even worth saying aloud,” she grumbled and turned to face him, breathing on her cold fingers. While she was technically more seasonably dressed than Zidane (and the whiskey did much to help), her species was too willowy and their fur too fine for the weather to be comfortable.

Zidane’s eyes flicked down at the motion. “Cold?”

She nodded. He held out a hand and she took it before her brain caught up with her. His hands were callused as he briskly rubbed warmth into her fingers, and it was surprisingly less flirtatious and more perfunctory than she expected. “You’re always so cold,” he said with a shake of his head and then like a whip crack, a silver thread, she remembered:

*Zidane, swimming in his fur lined coat, his hands a little damp from sweat as he dug his thumbs into her stiff palms. She’d winced from her perch on the jostling cargo in the hull of the ship, wrapped to the gills in wool and shivering like mad. Her fingertips tingled. “How are you always so warm,” she’d muttered, the ends of her long ponytail brushing his shoulder as he worked.*

*He looked up at her, an infectious grin. She was pleased to see he'd tied his short golden locks back today with the ribbon she'd given him. "You're just cold, Freya." Then his eyebrows waggled. "There are ways to cure that, you know."*

*She'd humphed. "In your dreams, monkey brains."*

Almost too soon he drew back and she reclaimed her hands with a soft thank you, tucking them into her long sleeves.

What a strange night. She watched as his tail, hidden while in the thick of the crowds, unwound and bobbed in the air. It would have thrown her to see another human with one, though with Zidane it somehow fit.

"C'mon," he muttered finally, pointing with his chin down the street. "You're staying at the Pony, right? Let me walk you back."

It ended up being a nice, if short walk. Apparently, they'd barhopped from one end of the Industrial district to the other and back again, likely no coincidence on Zidane's part. In the dark everything looked unfamiliar so she followed the thief blindly through empty cobblestone streets,

down winding steps, past inert fountains powered down for the night, and right up to the sooty brick building that made up the Drag and Pony. They stopped in front of the steps that lead up to it's red paint-peeled porch, garden boxes bracketed on either side overladen with vines and a lone orange lamp glowing from an upper window.

And then Zidane turned and... they stared at each other, the first awkward moment of the evening. A brisk wind, a gorgeous Lindblum night, and two old companions. Zidane and Freya. Friends.

Freya studied him in the lamp light, seeing the faint flicker of the young teenager she'd met like a ghostly trace over the real thing. His face was thinner now, hair longer, more scarred, though his eyes were that same earnest blue.

They'd once travelled for nearly a year together, the first month with a small group and then eventually just each other, from fetid swamps below Treno to the silver Cleyrian shores, delved deep into the mist and crested high into the Aerbs mountains. He'd been looking for a place and she'd been looking for a person, but they'd both been searching for a home. She'd never met another person who'd

understood how important that was, not til him, not since.

Three years, Freya thought as she looked at him. What a terrible waste. Tonight had proven he wasn't just the mischievous boy she'd met on the streets so long ago. If she let time slip away again, would the day come he'd actually forget her name?

Zidane, oblivious to all of this, scratched his head, looking at the lone illuminated window of the inn. When he looked back at her, curiosity had crept into his face. "Well I guess this is good night then..." he let the note hang, inviting.

Her mouth curled up despite herself. "Good night, Zidane," she said. He sighed ruefully and then shrugged, as if to say *I tried*. He was already turning back down the street, arms stretched behind his head, when she asked, "Are you sure you won't join the Hunt tomorrow? Could be fun."

He looked back at her. Under the shadows of the skeletal lattice work of steam pipes and the shafts of the silver moon, his blue eyes looked deep and ancient, that color of wet stone glowing cobalt beneath falling rain, of iridescent scales glimmering far down in a deep pool. "You and I have very different ideas of fun, Freya," he said slowly. And

then he grinned, wild and wicked to the bone, flipping around to face her as he walked backwards into the dark. ‘But who knows? Maybe.’ His voice was light and teasing. “I do enjoy a good chase.”



## Chapter 3

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**AN:** Thank you to all the lovely reviews. So grateful that people have taken the time to read a zombie fic risen from the grave. Happy New Years. :)

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Freya awoke at barmy o'clock in the morning to what sounded like pounding on her door.

A throbbing pain had settled behind her eyes and it took several minutes work to muster up the strength to crack them open and let the blurry surroundings come into focus. She'd somehow fallen directly asleep on top of the covers last night, not even making it to the pillow at the head of the bed. She'd had the sense at least to shed her overcoat and trousers the night before, though her nightclothes hung perfectly folded over a chair. Her bare legs pricked with cold and her shirt was a wrinkled mess and smelled of bitter alcohol.

She'd left the shades drawn like an idiot. It was still mostly dark out, though a faint lavender glow was starting to creep across what she could see of

the sky between crowded rooftops. As faint as it was the light still speared her eyeballs and she groaned, pressing her knuckles between her eyes to quell the incessant pounding in her head. It seemed to grow only louder.

Pounding?

Freya rolled over, blinking with bleary eyes at the direction of the sound. It took her a moment to realize that what she had thought was coming from her door was in fact coming from the far wall, the one shared by the adjacent room.

The knocking picked up in speed.

Then a muffled moan.

*Holy bullocks of Hashmal!* Propriety be damned, she would have gone for her spear and used it—Fratley forgive her—to wack on the adjacent wall like a crotchety aunt with an old broom, but when Freya went to stand she lurched head first into the comforter, mewling like a newborn kitten. Her headache glowed as earnest as the revelry next door and she swiftly pivoted in desire to wack *herself* out cold instead. It had been a long time since she'd been drunk, surely, but this was just pitiful.

The noises on the other side of the wall were growing obnoxious.

She rolled over away from the wall—overshot it, and promptly fell off the bed. Fortunately she'd dragged the pillow with her, which cushioned her aching head, but her shoulder smacked against the ground and her back wobbled the night stand beside the bed. Something—her bag, toppled to the floor and the contents spilled in a raucous mess, scrolls and bits and bobs rolling around her, pinching her tail and spilling curses from her mouth.

It took her a moment to realize something was different.

Silence.

Then the unmistakable sound of giggling through the wall.

There on the hard ground, Freya covered her face with the pillow and groaned.

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As they say, the early rat catches the lizard.

While the wall she shared with her neighbor had gone blessedly silent shortly after, years of ingrained

training made it impossible for Freya to return to the comfort of oblivion, no matter her tossing and turning. The pounding in her head also needed tending.

The apothecaries opened around dawn and so Freya dragged herself to the nearest one, shivering down the cobblestone streets in hastily drawn breeches and her spare doublet. Aside from the baker boy who ran past her in a hurry and the handful of steam engineers returning from late night shifts, there was hardly anyone to witness her pitiful state.

The brisk walk and the chill morning air roused her as well as a splash of cold water to her fur. As for the medicinal, bitter drink the old man behind the counter whipped up for her, the first sip was as bracing as a sharp slap to the face.

Freya glared at the suspicious green liquid. “Is this what they call karma?”

The old man watched with amusement as she proceeded to force the drink down. “Poison in to get the poison out,” he joked at her, then added as she returned the mug, “It’s got a bit of extra pep in it, so I’d suggest eating a hearty breakfast if you don’t intend to crash in a few hours.”

At first the prospect of food sounded about as pleasant as the foul tasting potion—that is until the smells of cooking grease and fats hit her at the inn door. Bacon, she thought dreamily all the way into the dining room. Salted bacon, poached eggs, with toast and fruit jam. A glass of freshly squeezed juice and a coffee with sweet cream to enjoy afterwards. The inn keeper's wife brought a heaping plate to her on a wooden tray and so she parked herself in a corner and watched the slow trickle of patrons from upstairs, some in what were clearly last night's pajamas and others in degrees of festive attire. Her thoughts turned to the day's main event.

The Festival of the Hunt was about as big a Lindblum event as Winter Yulemas, perhaps even more so. It was an official city-wide holiday and all shops and restaurants closed down at around noon to prepare for it. A kiosk in the business district was setup for participants to check in, which often meant the market was packed by mid-morning.

She may as well get an early start before the crowds. Armor and weapons checks could take a bit of time, and there was not of lot time afterwards for any last minute shopping before everything closed early. A stop at the trinkets and tonics shop to top off on—

Freya paused mid-chew as an awfully familiar figure came down the stairs.

He was wearing the same clothes from yesterday, though his belt and buckles were missing and the collar of his shirt was halfway tucked in from a hasty dressing. More disquieting was that his hair was down—she blinked at the gold curls that fanned down his back, longer and softer looking than her own locks growing raggedly to her shoulders since her last shear. As he sidled behind the growing line at the counter, she watched him give a full body yawn like an indolent cat, muscles bunching in his shoulders, arms stretched over his head in one long line down his back, tail curling in a golden kink.

Freya returned her gaze down to her half-eaten bacon, slowly chewing and swallowing. It was none of her business and yet her ears perked up as the inn keeper's wife greeted Zidane by name. Her eyebrows rose as curiosity got the best of her and she snuck a second glance.

“Morning, Maude,” he yawned sleepily, then gave the woman a sheepish grin. “Do you still make those succulent griddle cakes?”

“Those are a winter seasonal,” she scolded, but then winked and disappeared behind the window.

“Two plates, please,” he called, and then shuffled to the side, rubbing sleepily at his face as he made his way towards the chair on the other side of the room from where Freya sat.

Freya was preparing to make a stealthy escape... but should have known better than to stare too long. Halfway across the room, Zidane’s tail twitched and before she could react his head swung towards her direction. Their eyes met across the dining room and Zidane paused mid-step, hand falling from his face as his blue eyes blinked owlishly at her.

Not a half-second later, he was heading towards her with a shameless grin.

“Morning, beautiful,” he said. Her eyes immediately narrowed to slits as she pointed her fork at him in silence. “What?” He helped himself to a chair at her table, flipping it around and propping his arms on the top. Up close, he looked far more tired than usual, the dark circles under his eyes prominent. He didn’t look like he’d gotten a wink of sleep.

Up close, she could now see the dark hickey on his neck, just barely visible by the skewed gap of his shirt.

There were a whole host of things she could say to him, but all of them were awkward. While awkward had clearly never shamed Zidane a day in his life, the same could not be said for herself.

“You are not a morning person,” she said slowly. It was supposed to be a question, although it came out more matter of fact than she intended. He was peppy enough, but her mind kept unhelpfully supplying her with past memories of dragging him out with protest to morning practice. She really needed to stop assuming things about him.

He saluted her though. “Got it in one. But everyone likes breakfast.” He surveyed her plate with a critical eye. “When did you start liking bacon? You used to complain about buying it.”

She contemplated her plate. Bacon was not a thing in Burmecia, whose typical breakfast consisted mostly of rice and fish and pickled vegetables. She’d been fairly insistent about a decent breakfast for years after leaving home, but after awhile even she could admit rice was a chore to prepare daily while traveling.

“I never said I *didn’t* like it...” she hedged, then scowled when his quick hand snagged her coffee from her tray.



His eyes twinkled over the mug rim. “So contrary.” A sip, and a look of bliss crossed his expression. “But you have good taste in coffee. None of that straight black crap, get enough of that on the road.”

She returned to her plate and they sat for long minutes in silence, people bustling to and fro, the occasional slam of the inn door. She was not about to get trapped in a conversation about why he was here—it really was none of her business—but he didn’t seem to mind the quiet. In fact, by the time the cook Maude appeared from the kitchen with two stacks of griddle cakes and a heavy coating of succulant syrup, Zidane was dozing on the chair, the coffee loose in his grip, his chin slumped on the back seat. Her eyebrows rose.

With his hair down, his long lashes closed, and most importantly that perverted grin missing from his features, he looked almost... pretty. Criminally so. It was criminal that she kept thinking about it.

She contemplated nudging him awake but in the end she didn’t have to. Maude was halfway across the room when Zidane jerked up a little, eyes flashing open, and he blinked at Freya in confusion for a moment, forehead wrinkling. The look was

soon replaced as he turned with a smile to Maude as she approached.

Freya quietly finished off her eggs, trying not to roll her eyes as Zidane outrageously flirted with the inn keeper's wife. Who was she to spoil the lady's not-so-secret delight. When Maude finally retreated with a rosy blush and he stood up with his two plates, Freya snagged her coffee back from his side of the table, determined to salvage her after-breakfast treat. She expected him to just walk away, but he lingered for long enough in her periphery that her eyes flicked up.

He was staring at her with something of a serious expression for once. He seemed on the verge of saying something, though the hesitation was unlike him.

“What?” She grumbled.

Corn flower blue eyes regarded her, then he shook his head a little. “Nothing,” he said, tapping his chin with his free hand, and she almost called him out on it when he casually added, “Didn’t say this last night, but I missed you.”

Freya flushed all the way to her hairline. Thank god blushing was not a thing her species betrayed,

though the kinking of her tail was bad enough. She struggled with the desire to diffuse with sarcasm or a joke before her damning sense of fairness dragged from her, “Missed you too. Brat.”

He grinned at her cockily and then sauntered up stairs.

She didn’t linger too long in the dining room, just long enough to finish her coffee as she stared out the nearby window, condensation forming a mist over the steeped buildings and passerby. It looked like it was going to be perfect weather. A beautiful day for a fight.

When she returned to her room, she wasn’t even surprised to see the pair of empty plates sitting outside her neighbor’s door, still sticky with traces of syrup. She paused only a moment on the landing, staring at the plates, before jumping when she heard the murmur of voices on the other side of the door. The sound of a woman’s laughter.

Shaking her head slowly, Freya moved past and quietly closed her door.

Dragoo's armory already had customers by the time Freya arrived. Two young men were nervously inspecting some plate armor in the corner, while a red mage tested out the weight of one of the hanging blades. Everyone seemed to be avoiding the hulking Tauren with the giant axe staring people down as they scurried past him.

There were racks that had been brought out and set between some of the aisles, each loaded with an assortment of gear new and old that had been submitted for inspection.

The shop assistant looked harried when Freya approached the counter. "Purchase or pick up?"

Freya's eyes flicked to the side as the owner Dragoo lumbered by, carrying a giant gold shield in his hands. "Pick up for Crescent."

The assistant scribbled something down, then went to inspect some packages. He came back with a dyed red linen cuirass, the metal pieces on the chest gleaming like fish scales.

"Dressing rooms in the back," he said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at a dark hallway behind him. "Let us know if the adjustments were correct."

Package in hand, Freya made her way down the hall to several curtained off rooms. Inside the nearest empty one, there was just enough room for her, a short stool, and a grimy mirror propped into the corner.

She shucked her coat and linen shirt quickly, her fine fur prickling with cold. Her chest armor pad was a white corset like piece that she hadn't bothered to tighten this morning given the restriction it put on her upper body. She did so now, turning to the side to reach the cord laces under her arms, fingers pulling to draw the material tight against her chest and skin.

Once done, she inspected her form critically in the mirror.

Burmecians were uniquely proportioned compared to other species, which meant most gear purchased outside of the homeland required extensive customization. Cotton arm sheaths with leather plate inserts she'd gotten in Alexandria; armored shoulder pads on her coat from a hawker at East Gate. The chest under armor piece functioned as a breast band, given she'd never had much of a chest. Conversely, her naturally larger thighs coupled with her line of work had given her heavily

muscled legs that required considerable tailoring of thigh guards to fit. Her calve sheaths were her oldest pieces—originals from when she had first left Burmecia, given the complexity of their construction. She really needed to replace those soon.

The scars were new—all collection pieces from her solitary travels. Some shiny dark marks were visible between gaps in her clothes, others hidden away. Her fingers drifted to one of the most prominent— a burn mark on her right shoulder, where a bomb had gotten too close before self destructing. If she hadn't been in the middle of a desert and three weeks from the nearest town, that one might not have been a scar at all.

Hand falling to her side, Freya stared at herself. Given the memories of yesterday and her rude awakening at dawn, she'd been suppressing idle, nasty thoughts all morning. She was no busty barmaid at Bobo's, but for years she'd never thought much of it. Fratley had never seemed to pay mind to such things, and in those few twilight months when they'd been sweet, if brief, lovers, she had never felt undesirable.

Now, she just didn't know what to feel, other than resentment over feeling anything at all. What was the point?

Freya turned away, mouth pursed, and reached for the linen cuirass.

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Freya stepped out of the armory wearing her new purchase beneath her overcoat, adjusting her hat and squinting at the peek of morning sun cresting over the opposite roof tops.

Market place was twice as busy now as when she first arrived, so Freya found herself posting against one of the decorative flower beds that separated the street. Red cockscomb and white tulips brushed against her coat sleeves, perfuming a pleasant scent. A quick glance at the clock on the lamppost marked it a quarter to 8 o'clock, meaning she'd been in the armory for little under an hour. She was making good time, for once.

Alice's item shop was on the other end of the thoroughfare, but she'd make her way there eventually. Around her the crowd bobbed in a steady stream, children and dogs dashing between legs. The close proximity was expected but it was the noise

that always surprised her most about the city: laughter, inane conversations, furtive whispers, dogs barking, all overlapping into a persistent hum in her ears. She would be grateful for a return to solitary climes, if only for the silence.

“Zidane!” A high voice cried from nearby.

Freya’s ears twitched. With something like trepidation she turned towards the voice, half expecting to find a damsel in distress—only to be greeted with a small figure being jostled in the crowd. The person barely came up to the waist of most of the people around, and a particularly hard shove sent him sprawling to his knees, ready to be trampled by distracted passerby. Before she knew it, she’d stepped into the crowd, elbowing roughly a boarman just shy of stepping on the fallen kid.

“Watch it, bitch,” the boarman jeered at her, until he noticed the kid at his feet blinking bright yellow eyes from under the shadow of a straw hat. He grunted. “Stay out of the ’effing way if you can’t keep up, aye?”

Freya ignored him and the rest of the grumbling crowd, waiting patiently as the kid scrambled to his feet. They retreated to the spot she’d been standing in, and as the kid patted himself down, Freya



scanned the crowd and spotted a familiar golden head of hair bobbing its way towards them. She sighed. It was getting a bit disconcerting that for a city this large, she was constantly running into the same person. Thoughts for another time.

“You all right?” She said, turning back to the kid and finally getting a good look at him. She blinked slowly.

He—she?—was a species she’d never met before. Covered head to toe in sturdy blue robes, pants and leather gloves, a frayed straw hat perched on his head. She’d thought her first glance of his face had been too dim to make out in the crowd, but even with the sun shining directly on him now, there were only wisps of dark shadow curling under the brim of his hat.

The lack of features should have been disconcerting, but it wasn’t. Perhaps because of his nervous shuffling or the tremulous yellow eyes that stared up at her, full of emotion in an otherwise expressionless face. In fact, she felt a foreign pang where her shriveled feminine heart should be, which was far more disconcerting. Her mother must be rolling in her grave.

Those yellow moon eyes blinked up at her. “Thank you,” the voice stuttered, a hand going self-consciously to adjust his hat.

Freya was still at a loss for words when she felt a familiar presence appear at her side, a hand enclosing on her elbow.

“Thanks Freya,” Zidane murmured in her ear, sending the fine hair there on edge. He let go quickly and moved towards his companion, falling to a knee to straighten the kid’s robes. “Sorry about that, Vivi, I should have held your hand once we got here. You okay?”

Vivi nodded earnestly—and Freya twitched, rubbing at the odd softness in her chest. No wonder Zidane seemed so sweet with him. He was, dare she say it, *cute*.

He also seemed hardly older than a child. What was he doing with Zidane of all people?

“One of your companions?” she addressed Zidane, trying to hide the skepticism.

The thief got to his feet and turned to her, putting a casual hand on the kid’s head. “Yup. Meet Master Vivi Ornitier. Don’t be fooled by his size, this little guy’s got some serious magical fire power.” Zidane

threw him a wink and the boy hunched over a little, thumbs twiddling. The thief continued, “Vivi, this is Sir Freya Crescent, one of the best dragon knights Burmecia ever banished. Don’t be fooled by her looks, she’s got quite the temper.”

Freya glared at him. “Only for you, dolt.” Her expression softened when she turned to the boy. “Well met, Master Vivi.”

Vivi bobbed his head. “Nice to meet you.”

Introductions over with, the three turned to inspect the crowd, which continued to get more dense as the hour waned. “What are you both doing here?” She asked. Seemed like a poor time for general shopping.

Zidane scanned the crowd on his tip toes, tail poised for balance. “Looking for the check-in booth. Vivi’s signing up for the Hunt.”

She gaped at them. “He’s participating?”

Her concern blew over their heads. Zidane shrugged. “He likes the card reward.”

Vivi twiddled his thumbs bashfully. “Theater ships are cool.”

Freya narrowed her eyes, mouth flat. Sweet as that was, it was besides the point. Did Zidane not remember what the Hunt was like? Packs of roaming dire wolves could very well eat the kid for lunch. She elbowed the thief roughly until he looked at her, annoyed. “You are going to let him sign up *alone*?”

Her intense stare finally connected, though Zidane only snorted, shaking his head. “I’d be more worried for the monsters. Trust me, Vivi can take care of himself.” As one they both looked at the boy, who was staring up at them with wide trusting eyes. He looked about as threatening as a chocobo chick.

Freya’s mouth turned severe. Even Zidane hesitated, rubbing the back of his head. “You’ll be fine, right?”

Vivi adjusted his jacket. “I think so,” he said hesitantly.

Freya threw Zidane a look. He groaned. “No, Vivi. You gotta be more confident, or else Freya will murder me.” He made a shooing motion. “Try that again, just like we practiced.”

Vivi pondered for a moment and then suddenly struck a pose, giving them a big thumbs up. “I-I think so!”

*Reis* help her, but Freya almost cracked. Instead she raised an eyebrow at Zidane who had the funniest expression on his face, parts humor and resignation.

“Well, I do think he’s got it,” She deadpanned.

“Oh shut up.” Zidane elbowed her this time, and while she rubbed the spot, he gave a sigh. “Gods, must I join after all? I was hoping to relax this trip. Go on an airship ride.”

Take a girl for a ride, maybe. Freya wrinkled her nose, cursing the gutter trend of her most recent thoughts. “Don’t be such a bore,” she said.

Zidane twitched, rounding on her. “I am a lot of things, but I am not a *bore*,” he said, clearly offended, and Freya took the opening.

She threw him a supercilious smile. “Oh? Prove it.”

Getting into a staring contest with Zidane was not particularly mature, but today she was game to try. She internally cheered when he was the first to give in, eyebrows raising into his hairline, a smirk on his lips. “All right fine, if you insist... but hold on!” He raised a hand to hold her smugness at bay. “I’ll do it, but only on one condition.”

Freya was in sudden good cheer. Boring as the hunt had become over the years, the thought of lording the title of Master Hunter over Zidane was enough to make her hands itchy for her spear. “Reward money not enough for you?”

He shrugged. “I can get money anywhere.” He rubbed his palms together. “I need a more... interesting reward.”

She rolled her eyes. “If you say a victory kiss, I swear I’ll—”

“A date,” he interrupted.

Freya blinked.

“A proper one,” he continued. ‘Dinner, and not at a crappy bar. I’ll even escort you home before your bedtime and won’t ask for a cuppa.’ His eyebrows waggled. “Unless you want me to, of course.”

Freya stared at him, perplexed. “Why?”

He shrugged. “You’ll just have to find out. Those are my terms.” His grin was positively devilish. “If you lose, you and I go on a date.”

There was an odd feeling in her chest. His condition sounded mostly harmless, and she was an adult not a blushing school girl. There was nothing

he could throw at her that she couldn't handle, and besides she didn't think that was his intent anyway.

To be honest, she'd half expected to not see him again after last night. Dinner was nice, even welcome. But why call it a date?

She was being paranoid, although it was hard not to be with him. Unbidden, Freya's eyes drifted to the base of Zidane's neck, hidden by the collar of his shirt. He caught the look, his brow furrowing slightly, and when his hand came up to touch the spot, she cleared her throat quickly. "What's in it for me?"

His gaze became calculating. "Come on, Freya. You participate every year and yet how many times have you actually won?" She grimaced and he chuckled lowly. "Either your skills have gotten rusty, which I doubt, or you lack the proper motivation."

"Which you think you can provide?"

"I think I'll manage." His grin turned lazy. "What do you say?"

Suddenly, she became aware that Vivi was looking back and forth between them, head cocked

curiously. She'd completely forgotten he was there and felt heat in the back of her neck.

"You're ridiculous. Fine," she muttered, pointedly ignoring Zidane's celebratory jab in the air. "Although are you really asking the right person? Sounds like a better bet for your princess."

Zidane's eyes widened as if the thought had just occurred to him. Idiot. He crossed his arms, chin in hand, and contemplated her words for long enough to make her lip curl, ready to dismiss the whole thing.

Then he shrugged. "Those are the terms." At her questioning look, he said, "She wouldn't go for it anyway."

Freya sneered. "Then why should *I*?"

"What, you planning to lose?" At her irritated silence, he teased, "See? Stakes make it more fun. Now you'll take me seriously."

Her spear hand twitched. "I am always serious."

His eyes danced. "Of course you are."

And that was that. The Hunt was on.



The boys still needed to sign up and she needed her potions, so shortly after she bade them goodbye and headed out. However she hadn't got far enough out of earshot before she heard Vivi pipe up, "Zidane, what's a date?"

The innuendo in the man's voice was unmistakable. "Something grownups do with each other. I'll tell you when your older."

Freya hunched her shoulders, refusing to turn around and correct him. Knowing Zidane, he was probably waiting for just that.

## Chapter 4

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By quarter to noon, the Lindblum conference hall was packed with participants and spectators alike. For many folks this was the one time in the year that they could enter chambers of the royal castle outside of normal business hours. They gaped at the frescos depicting great battles on the high ceilings, the ornate crystalline chandeliers hanging over head, the columns carved of stone with famous royal hunting treasures displayed on velvet cushions in between. Not a few of the younger participants nervously eyed the Lindblum guards standing in pairs throughout the hall, their copper metal masks and stoic figures surveying the crowd for any suspicious activity.

From her place among the participants at the center of the room, Freya scanned the crowd. Feathered hats, bonnets, flower crowns, helmets. Humans, the plains bangaa, the seeq, and halflings of various species. Even the sea faring people from the islands off the mist coast had showed up, their jaunty pirate caps clustered to the side as people gave them a wide berth.

Freya quietly confirmed to herself what she knew all along.

No Fratley.

A familiar disappointment settled in her gut as she half heartedly examined the slowly assembling line of participants, seeing not a sign of a Burmecian tail in the pack. In fact, outside of the occasional visitor at the gates, there were few Burmecians at all in Lindblum. Hardly anywhere but the gates and towns near the homeland in fact, though not particularly surprising. Her country, from what she'd heard through bar gossip, had become progressively isolationist, be it through policy or practicality against the increasingly dangerous mists.

Freya noticed the significant eye she was getting herself, and settled back into her place in line with a disgruntled sigh. She fidgeted with the white patch with the number *10* in bold embroidery she'd been handed upon entering the hall, smoothing it against the lapel of her coat. The ceremony wasn't to start for a few more minutes and so outside of watching like a hawk as more participants trickled in, Freya was resigned to wait.

Freya's eyes half lidded as she tried to suppress a yawn. *Reis* forgive her, but this was the most boring

part of the whole thing. Perhaps she shouldn't have arrived half an hour early, for all the difference it made.

"Did you hear? The Alexandrian princess is here," someone down the line was whispering furtively to another. Her ears perked at that, though she resisted the urge to rubber neck like the human to her right began to do.

"I hear she's smoking hot."

The first person scoffed. "Not just 'hot'. She is the most babe-ilicious royal beauty in all the Mist continent." The person lowered his voice as he added, "Hard to believe that she's the daughter of *that* queen."

"Shut it, creepers," someone else piped up. "The Alexandrian family have good relationships with Lindblum. They say the Regent is even the princess's god-father."

"Lucky bastard," some creeper muttered loudly, only to be shushed by the whole line as a short mage in familiar blue robes wandered past, adjusting his straw hat as he stared in awe around him. As Vivi approached, he spotted her and his yellow globe eyes crinkled in recognition. He waved timidly, then

pointed at the number 8 on his jacket, cocking his head questioningly.

Freya leaned out of the line, then pointed to the empty spot beside the human next to her. Vivi nodded and quickly moved to his place.

Freya glanced at the large clock hanging on the far side of the conference room, then leaned behind the line to whisper, “Cut it close, don’t you think? Did Zidane sign up after all?”

Viv nodded and brought a hand to his mouth to whisper back. “Zidane is number 24.” He pondered his words. “Zidane was talking to friends for a while.”

She glanced down the line and said man was—she rolled her eyes—talking to a female bounty hunter and clearly not in his assigned space. Her lack of clothes left little to the imagination, and Freya could very well guess the conversation they were having. Likely the same type of conversations that caused him and Vivi to almost be late.

She straightened as the bell towers outside began to ring loudly, signaling the top of the hour. A hush fell over the crowd as the guards near the entrance hall all moved like clockwork toy soldiers, stepping

away from the walls and parting the crowd. An announcer in purple velvet appeared at the back of the hall. A quick wave of fingers glittering with magic and his sonorous spell amplified his voice. He cleared his throat, the sound echoing to the high ceiling, and as one the crowd turned to look at him.

The man nervously adjusted his bow tie. “Presenting her royal highness princess Garnet til Alexandros XVII.”

The doors opened and a young woman stepped into the hall. Immediately the muttering around her was silenced.

“Gods above,” the lanky youth beside Freya whispered.

The Princess was certainly a beauty, though the word was somewhat lacking to the reality. She wore a simple dress, pale blue silk without the frills and lace of the latest Lindblum fashions, and yet it fell off her figure effortlessly with just a hint of tasteful curves at the bodice and hip. Her long hair was gathered into simple twists around her face, highlighting the fullness and length of her dark tresses that trailed to her waist. Freya would not be surprised if a new fashion trend had been born in this very moment.

For a girl of sixteen, Garnet's features were surprisingly mature. Full lips dabbed just so with rouge, pale skin dusted with rosy pink color in the cheeks, and half lidded dark eyes with long lashes that stared straight ahead. It was the expression in them that left the biggest impression — neither boredom nor vapidty, but a piercing awareness, even pensiveness.

Last night, Zidane had not said much about his princess, although from what she gathered they had been traveling for many weeks fleeing the Alexandrian lands. It was hard to believe that the young woman before her was in part responsible for the explosion to South Gate that had been seen across Lindblum a short week ago. Not at all the type of princess one would expect to be associating with thieves.

Freya snuck a glance down the line at Zidane and found him standing alert, his eyes locked on the princess. A slight frown tugged at his lips. Freya wondered at it, eyes returning to the young woman.

As the Princess passed the line and ascended the dais to take a seat next to a tall man in silver armor standing attention, the announcer at the back cleared

his throat once more. “Presenting Minister Artania Izunia.”

Heads turned once more as the familiar figure of Lindblum’s minister appeared at the end of the hall. His long grey hair was pulled back in a stately tail and his beard plaited with a burnished gold bow to match his robes, a nod to the festivities. He ascended the dais in quick order, taking his place behind the podium. A quick gesture by the announcer who had quietly scurried after him and the air near his throat began to vibrate, carrying his voice loudly through the hall.

“Ladies and gentleman, I thank you for your attendance on this auspicious day. Participants, I bid you welcome to these hallowed halls. Many a Master Hunter has stood among you in years past and I look forward to seeing a Master, new or old, once again crowned in the fountain square this evening.”

He looked around at the crowd. “I regret to say that Regent Cid is currently indisposed and unable to join the festivities. However he wished me to assure you that he looks forward to seeing you all at the crowning. Now...”



He snapped his fingers and a scribe on each end began going down the line, scribbling notes with a feather quill. As the minster talked to the crowd of the long history of the hunt, a young scribe approached Freya.

“Please state your name and what award you are interested in.” He sounded bored out of his mind.

“Freya Crescent.” Then Freya’s nose wrinkled, thinking of Bobo. “The ring, if you please.”

He scribbled something down. “You are assigned to group B in the industrial district. Please assemble at the train station in...” he scanned his notes, “... half past the hour. You may remain in the hall here until the designated time. The conductor will take you to your position.”

She nodded and he moved on. Shortly after the scribes had worked through the thirty some participants, Artania turned to address the group.

“On behalf of Regent Cid and all of Lindblum, may your blade be true and your hunt be fruitful.” Then he turned and with little pre-amble, exited out of a side door.

The crowd began to disperse quickly after that, moving to find their places among the castle

parapets and away from the dangers of the streets. Most spectators would line the bridge walkways between castle and the airship docks, cheering on participants from up high.

Freya didn't move, leaning on her spear and observing the movement around her. Vivi stepped closer to her as the man between them departed. "This is exciting," he told her, golden eyes glowing warmly under the chandeliers. "I've never done something like this before."

She nodded, feeling charmed that the mage felt comfortable to stand and talk with her while they waited. He seemed like a sweet boy—which made her reservations regarding his participation all the more prominent. She said none of this though. "It is quite a show, isn't it?" She turned to him with a smile. "Have you been to Lindblum before this?"

He shook his head. "This is my first time."

A murmur nearby caught Freya's attention and she looked up to see a wide birth given to a man in silver armor heading straight towards them. To Freya's surprise, the young princess trailed after him.

“Master Vivi,” the man boomed as he stopped before the young mage. “The princess and I will be rooting for you.” He was tall with a square, freshly shaven face and eyes and brows riddled with traces of frequent stress lines. He wore head-to-toe silver plated armor that while intimidating when polished, must be hell to keep clean and maintained on the road. It was all a bit on the nose for her tastes, and yet the well kept broad sword strapped to his belt spoke of mastery not to be underestimated.

Vivi stammered. “T-thanks Steiner, Dagger.” Then he blanched, looking around. “I mean, Princess.”

Freya’s eyebrows raised at the curious nickname even as the princess stepped forward and crouched down in her dress. The smile she bestowed upon the kid would have destroyed lesser men. “You can call me whatever you like, Vivi. We’re friends.” She held out a fist and Vivi bumped his with hers—perhaps the most adorable thing that Freya had ever seen in her life. Holy Hashmal, Zidane had the most interesting companions.

“Just remember,” Steiner put a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Offense is the best defense. You are the

best magic caster I have ever seen. You can't let that monkey Zidane win."

Vivi raised his fist to Steiner. "I'll try my best." Then surprisingly Vivi looked at her, almost apologetic. "Sorry, Freya."

Freya grinned. "We're all here to win, Vivi. From one warrior to another, I wish you good hunting."

The armored man looked up at her. "Ah, pardon our interruption." He straightened, eyes lingered on the crest on her coat, before he held out a hand. "I am Adelbert Steiner of Alexandria. I've known few Burmecian warriors, but all I have met had straight blades and fierce hearts. Apologies for lack of decorum, I am not familiar with your family."

She shook his hand in return, mouth wry. "Freya Crescent. And it is quite all right, it is not particularly well known." She was the first and the last, in fact, and likely all she would be remembered for was infamy.

She turned to the Princess who lingered a step away, and then bowed. "Your Majesty."

Princess Garnet nodded politely. "Are you a friend of Vivi's?"

“We have only recently met but he has made good company.”

“She’s Zidane’s friend,” Vivi piped up helpfully. Or not so helpfully, as Steiner’s eyes immediately narrowed, sizing her up again, and even the Princess’s eyebrow’s raised in surprise. Freya internally sighed. Good old Zidane, a pox on her reputation even to his own comrades.

“Zidane?” Garnet said at last, curiosity leaking into her voice much to Steiner’s clear disgruntlement. “Are you part of Tantalus?”

Before Freya had time to defend or deny, as if summoned by the very mention of himself, Zidane suddenly approached, hands behind his head. “What’s that about Tantalus?”

Steiner immediately stiffened. Vivi bounced over to him. “I’m in the Business district. Group A.”

Zidane put a hand on his head. “I’m over in Theater.” He winked. “But good for you, all the good monsters will be where you are. Save a few for me, won’t you?”

Steiner snorted. “He should do no such thing. Vivi will be the winner of this event, mark my words.”

The thief straightened to face the knight. The two surveyed each other with flat expressions.

“Rusty.”

“Thief.”

Zidane flashed a smile. “Prickly as ever, I see.” Then his eyes slid over to the young woman, who’s brow had ticked down. He looked her over for a long moment, eyes flicking over her dress. Then Zidane bowed, low and obscenely formal. “Princess.”

Garnet gazed at his theatrics, cool-eyed. “Hi Zidane.”

Freya’s eyebrows rose into her hair. Well this was certainly unexpected. Zidane not launching into immediate flirtation? A young woman already on guard against his charms? She hadn’t exactly expected Garnet to be smitten, but this was far less chemistry than she had imagined, given his reaction the other night. “Vivi was just introducing us to your friend.”

Zidane turned to Freya at last, then grinned. “We’ve been running into each other a lot recently, huh?” He turned to the other two. “Freya’s not part of Tantalus. And don’t let my association taint your

impression, Rusty. She's a seasoned warrior that has travelled the world all over, plus she can run circles with that spear. She's usually dragging me out of trouble, not getting me into it.' He tossed her a wink. "She only barely tolerates me."

Freya sighed loudly. "Tolerate is such a strong word."

Zidane put a hand to his heart. "You wound me."

Garnet, Freya realized belatedly, was now openly staring at her, the look in her eyes unreadable. When their eyes met, however, the princess shook herself out of it. "I'm sure you have many stories," she said, clearing her throat. 'I would love to hear them some time. I've so rarely left Alexandria, and then only to visit Lindblum via airship.' She smiled, and it was a trace shy. "I confess I'm envious."

Before Freya could respond, Zidane snorted. "Traveling it not all its cracked up to be, especially through the mists. What we saw in the Forgotten Forest was only a taste. Better to stick with airships."

Garnet's smile disappeared, even as Steiner put a hand to his head. "Quite," he said faintly.

“Preferably ones that we are not driving, your highness,”

It was not that Freya disagreed with them. It was that she could clearly see, where the other two did not, that the comments stung the Princess fiercely, valiantly though she tried to hide it. Freya thought of the prince of her own kingdom, who even when she’d left had watched her go with jealous eyes, locked behind bars of glass and gold.

“It is true it is dangerous,” she said slowly, catching the princess’s attention, “and yet I have found over the years that if one wishes to know how different the world can be outside, reading about it is only the beginning. Burmecians view braving the mists as something of a rite of passage. Can we say we own the land without first walking it’s valleys and peaks?”

The sudden interest in Garnet’s eyes to a subject she was clearly warmed to finally belied her young age—only to be dashed by Zidane’s careless, “Burmecian *warriors* brave the mists, not their kings.”

Freya stared at him wordlessly. Zidane shrugged. “No offense Freya, but there is a big difference between a trained Burmecian Dragon Knight and the



rest of the populace. The world is dangerous enough trying to live in it, never mind explore it.”

“I think,” Garnet said stiffly, the first sign of emotion beyond politeness in her eyes since she’d walked into the throne room, “that I am capable of understanding that nuance on my own.”

Zidane frowned, then sighed. “All right, fair enough.”

An awkward silence descended on the group. Steiner was looking at Freya with new interest at the mention of her knighthood but with a quick glance at his princess’s sudden distant expression, he cleared his throat. “Well, shall we leave them to their preparations, your highness?”

Garnet nodded curtly. She turned to the three of them. “Good luck, Vivi, Lady Freya.” Her cool eyes landed on Zidane. “...Zidane.”

Zidane rubbed the back of his head. “Damn. You’re mad,” he said. Then to the group’s collective surprise, he stepped forward and took her hand, ignore Steiner’s extreme displeasure. ‘I’m only worried, honest. I know you can take care of yourself.’ Then he winked. “With a bit of training, Dagger would make a fine airship pilot.”

Steiner chopped at their held hands, forcing Zidane to let go of Garnet. His expression was stone. “Please keep your unsolicited advice to yourself, thief.”

As Zidane turned to address Steiner, Garnet took a step back, looking away. And—Freya hummed. There it was, the pretty blush she had expected to find all along, although accompanied along with it an expression both stymied and frustrated. A familiar feeling, Freya thought with sympathy.

Despite their bickering, the camaraderie between the four was so clear it could cut glass. Kind as they had been to include her, Freya felt the distinct discomfort of an outsider looking in. With a quiet good luck to Vivi, who was watching all the back and forth with innocent interest, she excused herself and turned to walk away.

She’d gotten halfway across the hall before she was stopped by a call, “Hey Freya!”

Freya hunched over as several people around her looked around. She turned to see Zidane staring after her, hands on hips and a shit-eating grin on his face.

“Don’t forget our bet!” he called, causing Freya to grit her teeth at all the additional looks she was

receiving.

From behind him, the Princess too was looking between the two of them. Though her expression was carefully blank, the wary scrutiny of those dark eyes left Freya little in doubt. Her ears flattened. Damn Zidane for creating complexity where there were none.

She would have flipped him off if not for the inspection of a thousand commoners, nobles and an attentive Alexandrian princess. Freya's pointed glare only made the thief grin wider. Disgusted, she turned and left.

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Something was off.

Perhaps it was the nervous looks of the guards as they quickly hustled the five candidates that formed her group onto the empty street car before it had fully stopped. The trolley started up again with a groan of metal and soon they were hurtling down the track at a speed that seemed above normal regulation.

Freya stared at the back of the nervous guard with his hand on the lever and who was avoiding

everyone's gaze. Then she faced the trolley doors and drew her spear from her back in a fluid motion. A few of the more seasoned warriors in the group picked up on it too, each readying their axes and blades. The remaining followed suit shortly after, confusion and apprehension in their faces.

The street car rattled into the Industrial district's empty loading zone just as the bell began to toll, the signal that the hunt had started. Freya glanced at the giant clock tower on the building, then frowned.

"It's not one o'clock," she addressed one of the guards. "Are we starting early?"

The man glanced at her, then shrugged.

The red mage beside her chuckled. The crystals on her rapier began to glow. "Looks like this year is going to be an interesting one, boys."

Freya's ominous feeling grew as her group filed out quickly into the station. It was not in fact completely empty. Shock registered when she saw a few townsfolk darting through the back doors, clearly not dressed for battle.

"What are you doing?" She whirled on the guards, who took a step back at her sharp tone. "Go after them! There will be beasts on the streets!"

With a quick nod, they departed after the people, armor clanking. Freya swiftly turned back around to see that a few of her group had moved towards the entrance of the station and thrown open the doors, though many had stalled there, staring out onto the street. With a grimace, Freya jogged forward, pushing through the bodies towards the archway.

The sight that greeted her outside made her steps falter, a slow breath hissing from her teeth.

The beasts had been loosed. Packs of Fangs and Mu galloped through the street, teeth gnashing at the heels of warrior and monster alike. Skirmishes were breaking out all over, street stalls smashed, carts overturned. To her horror, a few beasts were pawing at the barred doors of homes, gouging deep scratches in the wood as they howled, saliva dripping onto thrashed wreaths and doormats.

The worst of it, though, was the sky filled with carrion. Hundreds and hundreds of black feathered beasts created a patch work out of the blue sky above. Even Freya, having seen her fair share of monsters hordes, felt momentarily taken aback.

One of the younger swordsman beside her whispered, “Odin take me, am I going to die?”

“Now *this* is more like it!” one of the axeman nearest the front cackled suddenly, brandishing his axe at the birds. The closest pack, some fifteen birds in total, veered as one at the sound, a sea of glowing demon eyes among feather black wings. The man whooped in delight. “A-hunting we will go!”

In answer, the flock swooped forward and all hell broke loose.

## Chapter 5

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Seven years ago, on the Festival of the Hunt, the morning skies above Lindblum were overcast.

Freya stood on a dew-damp roof in the bustling business district, arms crossed and staring with a faintly curled lip at one of the large clocks nestled into the brick facade. The mechanical whirl of its gears and the ticking of its second hand was loud, a persistent buzz that followed her in her dreams.

“These Lindblumers,” she said with undisguised contempt, eyes flicking to the next building over, where another such clock resided, “are very preoccupied with time.” She could count with two hands the number of clocks she could see from her vantage point alone.

Seven years ago, Freya was seventeen, accompanying Fratley to participate in the Festival of the Hunt for the first time as an official Dragon Knight, or a Dragoon as was more colloquially used. The color of the stitches on her coat of arms had not yet faded, and so too the chip on her shoulder. That would not fade for years to come.

Beside her, Fratley stirred from his crouch on the roof edge. His long brimmed hat lifted as he glanced at her from his contemplation of the streets below. His icy blue eyes were piercing, seeing what she did not say and probably what she did not even know herself.

He did not respond to her words; he often did not when she was in such a prickly mood. Fratley was twenty-five going on ancient and had been a Dragoon for over a decade to her one, rarely disturbed by the buffeted winds of circumstance and certainly not her temper. Instead, his gaze turned to the silhouette of buildings carving lines into the distant Aerbs mountains with their snow-capped tops.

“There is a storm coming,” he murmured, and Freya came away from the clock to stand beside him, placing the end of her spear on the roof edge. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. There was an electric tingle to the air, a bite in her lungs that felt familiar in this noisy city of brick and steel. She opened her eyes, smiling slightly at the sky.

“It might rain today,” she said wistfully. “I hope it does.”



“Perhaps,” Fratley said, shifting his lance from one shoulder to another. His gaze drifted back down to the streets, scanning the crowds for the warriors among them. He was always on the hunt for a potential challenger, a hush in him not unlike the predator’s bright gaze. “Though rains make poor fighting conditions for most people.”

“Not for us,” she said shortly, and she saw a flicker of a rare smile in him. And oh, the rush that sent through her, as strong as a burst of adrenaline in the midst of a battle, heady and sweet. She shifted to cover her reaction, coughing into a hand.

Fratley looked up at her then, expression stern. “That is not a cold, I hope.”

Freya felt a flush in the back of her neck. She had found over her travels with him that Fratley was something of a worried nurse maid when it came to her health. She tried to remember it was sweet, but mostly it annoyed her-which only amused him. “Of course not. It’s just the foul, smoggy air stuck in my throat. Lindblum is full of it.” She sniffed. “A little rain would do this city good.”

Amusement colored his eyes. He opened an arm silently, and with a thrill she went to him, settling down on the edge of the roof as he wrapped an arm

around her shoulders and drew her into his body. The soft fur of his jacket smelled of the road, and she gave herself a moment to breathe him in, tucked under the curve of his jaw where he could not see her girlish impulse.

“I hope it does not rain,” he said after a moment. “Good weather makes a fair fight.”

She rolled her eyes at that, pulling back just enough to look up at him. “Fratley, it hardly matters. Stare all you want into the crowd, but you know as well as I do that no one here is even on the same level as you.”

Fratley did not say anything, which only confirmed he knew she was right. His fingers curled in her hair, a gentle and familiar touch, and yet his eyes remained fixed somewhere in the crowd. The look in his face troubled her. Far away, as if he was already contemplating the next bend in the road before they had even turned the first corner. She felt that familiar fear stir within her every time they left Burmecian lands to travel-that there would come a time where at the end of the road, she would turn back towards home and he would not turn with her.

“What are you hoping to find?” She ventured at last. The conversation was a well-worn topic, but

sometimes it was important to ask again what he was searching for. Even if only to confirm to herself it had not yet changed. “What will you do when you find someone with whom to challenge yourself? Will you be satisfied?”

As he always did, Fratley contemplated her words seriously. This time, to her relief, the words were still the same tenor as the times before.

“I do not chase what I think I am missing,” he said softly, his arm tightening around her as he tucked her head under his chin. His heartbeat was solid and steady in her ear. “I chase what I want to become.”

Even the delight and warmth of his embrace could not shake the familiar stir of resentment that bloomed in Freya’s gut, even tinged as it was with shame. The differences in their circumstances were never more apparent than in these moments, and Freya resisted the urge to draw away from him, if only to avoid cause in him to hesitate speaking his mind, of which he already so seldom did. She *wanted* him to confide in her, even if what he said struck no chord within her and probably never would.

Fratley Iron-Tail, youngest Dragoon to ever be knighted at the tender age of thirteen, had been born into a noble line of royalty-serving Dragon Knights whose history dated back to the founding of the Burmecian Dynasty. Freya, on the other hand, had been an orphan ward of his house from a village under his domain too close to the borders to be properly protected by regular patrols. Crescent, the common last name among orphans she had taken upon herself first like a scar, and later like a shield, marked her as a bastard without family and similarly defined the struggle of her existence.

The fight for survival, Freya could understand. She had clawed her way from the mud hovels to stables to practice halls to decadent ballrooms, all the while feeling the eyes of others measuring her and finding her wanting. There was no bar of worth within herself that she had made of her own volition, just the expectations of others that she must constantly, always overcome.

But what did Fratley know of such a trial? He, cultivated like a rare bloom in a glass greenhouse, who was the best and brightest of many generations before and likely ones to come. He did not wilt under the turbulence of the outside world, but rather met it and thrived in it. He did not meet

expectations, he defined them. His path as a Dragon Knight remained uncharted, one determined solely by what he endured, by what he dared, and its end may very well be the glass ceiling to which others could only aspire to.

And yet still, to hear him talk of what he wanted to become and not what he already was, felt like a luxury to Freya. One she would never tell him, not that he did not already probably know. He had always respected her path and she would his, even if in moments of weakness she sometimes wished they could walk the same path, or barring that even ones remotely near to each other, an approximate side by side.

As if sensing the dark turn of her thoughts, she felt the press of Fratley's mouth against her temple. "I do believe you are right, Freya," he said in her ear, a thumb stroking along her neck bringing her consciousness back to him immediately, and she shivered at the tingles it started there. "That it will rain after all."

The rains did come, swift and sudden for an hour's time, only to be later broken by a mocking bright sun. And when, within ten minutes of the start of the Hunt, Freya slipped off a rain-slick roof due

to poor judgement in footing and tumbled four stories down into a cart, knocking herself unconscious, Fratley did not laugh at her or rebuke her for her arrogance. Nor did he coddle her bruised ego when he went on to cinch the title of Master of the Hunt by a landslide. But later that night, he did weather the brushfire of her indignant anger, and then the storm of her bitter self-recrimination, so much harsher than anything he could say. And then, he kissed away her tears, and undressed her under the moonlight of their shared bedroom and made love to her in gentle silence.

When she looked up into his eyes within the cradle of his arms, there was no judgement, no expectation; just the reflection of herself naked and the tenderness he reserved for her alone. A tenderness that had been her only rock in this turbulent, unforgiving world, born when they had locked eyes as children in the remains of her destroyed village, him a lord's son and her a suddenly motherless welp. When he had held out his hand for her in sympathy to take and never let go.

Seven years ago, on the Festival of the Hunt, Lindblum was overcast, Fratley was restless, and Freya was in love.

In the present, Freya was breathing hard and quietly steaming.

Trick Sparrows were annoying pests at the best of times, but in packs they were an absolute menace. Vermin and carrion though they might be, to underestimate their cruelly taloned feet and sharp skull-like beaks could result in the gouging through of an eye or a soft underbelly.

Freya had immediately jumped to the roof tops upon exiting the station, and to her immediate displeasure, half the bird pack followed her.

She took off, racing along steel girders, bouncing along rooftops circling the open area where the majority of the fighting was taking place, all the while the pack of Trick Sparrows harried her. She picked them off one by one. Skewering one on a descent to a low roof. Knocking another into a chimney with a crunch. When she dropped into an alley the buzzards screeched, swirling above the gaps of the roofs before whirling away.

Freya turned in the alleyway to find herself face to face with a dire wolf Fang, eyes glowing demon red in the darkness, blood dripping from its jowls. Freya grimaced at the tight walls around her, readying her spear.

It lunged and she ducked, dodging behind it and racing for the open entrance. It chased her through the corridor, boxes and crates tumbling and splintering under the force of their passing, and she was almost at the end when the creature suddenly lunged and she was forced to whip around, spear guarding her throat against a newly fashioned necklace of wolf's teeth.

Freya and the wolf tumbled out of the alley into the street, her fending off the wolf's howling bite with the length of her spear. A flip backward on to her feet put distance between her and it, and then she darted forward in a run, throwing her spear in a screech of muscle along her back. The lance sailed ahead of her pattering feet, spearing heavily through the chest of the Fang, it's eyes rolling up white, it's body beginning to tip, and she wrenched her spear out of its body before it hit the ground without breaking her stride, glancing quickly around.

Most of the participants around her were pitifully unprepared. Falling into huddled groups to protect their backs from the beasts, which while in theory was fine but in practice resulted in drawing the attention of too many demon-red eyes. The wolfish Fangs stalked in ever tightening circles, licking their salivating chops, and the birds above screeched and



struck like tornadoes touching down on the ground, sending people and beast alike scattering in their wake.

They had to thin the herds or this siege would not end. Until this situation passed, no one in the industrial district would be able to focus on the hunt.

A well-timed twirl of her lance drove the metal rod into the neck of a diving trick sparrow with a sickening crack, causing the creature to fall lifeless to her feet and the several other birds that targeted her to veer wildly away in a flurry of feathers and screeches. Freya used their momentary distraction to survey the other participants within range, contemplating her options.

Of the handful of warriors with some talent, Freya dismissed the man with the heavy-axe barreling down the street outright. He was at his most useful doing what so clearly pleased him, wildly swinging his axe at the teeming monsters and drawing their attention. The red mage from the train, on the other hand, seemed a fairly competent tactician, casting fireballs at choice points along the street to prevent being routed by the cunning Mu hovering near the outskirts, looking to pick off and drag away unwary targets.

They were separated by a furious battle between participants, Lindblum guards and a pack of fangs, steel and claw, shouting and snarls, but that was of little consequence. A temporary gap broke between the bodies and she took it in a running leap, powerful legs ramming into the back of a snarling Fang and using it as a jumping board to launch herself into a wall run off one building and land in a controlled crouch on the edge of a fountain next to the red mage, who jumped at her sudden entrance.

“You crazy Burmecians,” she snapped, “I could have scorched you.”

Freya kept to herself the immediate retort that the red-mage would have tried and failed; what she needed was cooperation, not antagonism.

“There are too many people congregated here,” Freya said swiftly. “It would be better to retreat and regroup.”

The red mage’s expression turned serious as she nodded, eyes returning ahead as she scanned the field. “The station?”

Freya nodded. “The Mu will leave off if they are forced to compete with the Fangs. And a second group could circle back around the other side and

attack the Fangs from behind. A pronged attack may cause them to scatter.”

“A solid strategy. I can round up the greenhorns,” the red mage grunted, hair lifting in a rippling wave as three fireballs the impressive size of large dinner plates winked into existence and began to chase a yipping pack of Mu back into the shadows. She was quite good for a magic user. “But what of the birds?”

Freya smiled grimly. “The birds are not the only ones that can take to the skies. Leave them to me.”

The red mage’s grin turned ghastly. “Then bring on the rain of their bodies, Burmecian. I do enjoy a good shower.”

Freya snorted-humans always made such silly puns-and then swiftly jumped to the top of the fountain and balanced there carefully, dodging wayward talon and wing. She brandished her spear, which in her hands began to glow a faint green. Her hair fluttered from the wind bleeding off of it. “*Reis*,” she breathed, feeling the icy prickle of blood pumping swift and fast in her veins, brought to fervor with spell.

Most Burmecians did not have magic, and what little they did was a jealously guarded secret tied

deeply to their famous gods. The ice prince Mateus the Corrupt, Emmerololth of the rain, or Fratley's own patron, the earthen beast Hashmal, the Bringer of Order. Reis the Hunter, on the other hand was a minor god, worshiped mainly by the Burmecian villages deep in the forested mountains, far from the glistening capital city of rain with its tall, imperious walls. Freya's patron saint, one of the few Burmecian gods depicted with a feminine form, was known for her skill with a bow and the pair of wild hunting hounds at her heels. She was swift as a storm and as ruthless as a wolf, capricious and ephemeral. There had not been a Burmecian Dragoon for one thousand years who could call upon her winds, and yet like so many other things about Freya, this patronage stoked alienation rather than awe.

It did not matter. While Fratley at the height of his strength could rend the earth asunder with his strikes, Freya could jump higher and clearer than the very birds of the air, as she would do so now. Let the strength of her steel serve to teach what her words could not.

A whiplash of air rippled over the surface of the fountain water as Freya tapped into the faith of *Reis*, spooling threads of heat in her feet and legs, and

jumped into Dragon Dive. She shot as if from a canon in a brilliant flash upward, winds buffeting bird and beast. She was as air, weightless, as she easily ascended to the heights of Lindblum clock towers and low hanging airships, the distant mountains curving faintly along the horizon.

A twirl of her lance in one hand, a half-breathless laugh in the cold air, and Freya turned her blade towards the heart of the largest flock of trick sparrows below, some fifty beasts.

And then gravity took hold once more, the green glow fading from her skin, and she plummeted.

To jump a Dragon Dive was to knock on death's door, as her old gruff instructor used to say. What carried one up was power, but what brought one down was belief. Many a Burmecian had broken themselves on the jump, and at shorter heights than this, unable to handle that singular moment where magic's reach stretched taut against the pull of the earth and one faced the gravity of their actions alone.

It was collectively thought even among Burmecians that those who jumped had either a death wish or a hell of a lot of faith in the gods. Freya didn't think she had much of either, but in a

Jump there was no time to think, only to feel and be free.

With a wordless scream and a flash of blinding white light, her fury turning the spell to the shape of swirling, writhing dragons, Freya pierced through the flock in an explosion of magic, feather and snapping bone. The birds screamed. She only had a brief moment to nurture her vicious satisfaction before she was forced to inevitably return to the more important and non-trivial matter of landing without breaking her legs.

Her lancer spell had dissipated some of her deathly momentum, transferring it from her to the struggling beasts shooting like skipping stones across cobbled streets, but transference would have worked more completely on a single target as opposed to so many small ones. As a result, she dropped from inside the flock at a more normal, though still terrifying speed and the tops of Lindblum buildings rushed at her nearly before she was ready. She skidded first on a steeped roof with grit teeth and a shriek of clenched muscle, the heels of her leather soles burning white hot from friction and her lance driving a furrow in the shingles behind her. She sailed off the edge of the roof, barely managing to kick off one wall and then another, and

then she landed solidly on top of a wooden wagon with a grunt.

Unfortunately, while she landed on her feet, the wagon did not care for her stunt. It capsized in an instant, a clean break along the bed as if she'd cleaved it with a large blade, and Freya fell with an embarrassing shout into an ungraceful heap, wind knocking out of her as she landed flat on her back.

If Fratley were around, she would have hid her face in shame. Wagons and carts, pox to them all. At least she was still conscious this time.

She heard footsteps approach and even though she was still out of breath she flailed her arms up into a sitting position, squinting up at the sunlight perfectly placed to blind her from that angle.

“Shit, Freya,” a familiar voice said and she blinked the spots clear to see *Zidane*-she groaned inwardly, of course it was him-picking his way over the remains of the cart carrying a two-bladed butterfly sword over his shoulders. His blue eyes were bright in the shadows cast by the nearby roofs. She was half contemplating fleeing down the street out of embarrassment, when he secured the blade to his back with a casual twirl and held out a hand to

her. His next words fizzled her brain, “That was sexy as hell.”

Freya’s heart was beating fit to burst but she still found it in her somehow to blush, coughing out an out of breath, “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” Zidane said lowly, eyes glittering, and again her brain stopped working, unsure of how to proceed. When she didn’t take his hand, he shook his head and reached down to grab her elbow to haul her up. She acquiesced without resistance, standing shakily to her feet. ‘Never thought it’d be so hot watching someone mop up a bunch of birds,’ he mused, “but you always were something special.”

Freya stared at him at a loss for words, her scalp still prickling with adrenaline. Zidane eventually took pity on her and patted her shoulder with a grin too self-satisfied for her liking, then leaned down to pick up her lance and hand it to her. She took it gingerly, then shook herself and did a once over. Miraculously, she had broken no bones, though the wood of the wagon had gouged ugly scratches in her leather guards.

“What is...” she stopped, then blinked at him. “Why are you here? I thought you were in the



Theater District.”

Zidane’s eyebrows raised into his hairline and he pointed at a flag staff above their heads waving an orange flag instead of the blue industrial one. “We *are* in the Theater District, sweetheart.”

Right. Freya dusted at her coat to shake off the fine splinters and wood-chips. Her jump must have carried her farther than she’d anticipated. Ignoring his amusement, she looked around at the street which seemed far less busy than the one she’d come from. “They started the hunt way before time and the monsters were already running amok when we left the station. Was it the same for you?”

Zidane nodded, cracking his neck. “Our street car was forced to emergency stop when a pack of Mu started racing down the tracks. We’ve been mopping up the beasts ever since, though it’s finally calmed down some. I was just starting to wrap up here when I saw your little—” his eyes glittered again, “-performance.”

Freya ignored that too, choosing to scoff instead. “This is highly irregular,” she said crossly, stepping finally out of the remains of the wagon and forcing Zidane to back up. “There were still people out on

the streets when it started. And exactly how can they keep track of score with all this mess?”

“Oh, they’re keeping track. As a matter of fact...” Zidane pointed up with a finger and on cue, a magically amplified bell sounded in the air. After a few seconds, a sonorous voice announced over the air waves, “And with a jump of 52 points, Freya Crescent is in the lead! Can you believe it folks, that’s 52 1-pointers she felled in a single swoop!”

Freya’s jaw fell open, appalled. In the cacophony of fighting in the industrial district, she hadn’t noticed the announcements. Zidane shook his head. “Never underestimate the people’s love of entertainment.”

Freya rubbed at her face furiously. “Humans,” she grunted.

“Not just humans,” Zidane said, then motioned her to follow him back towards the square. “It’s Lindblumers. They all go mad about the festivities, even at the cost of innocents getting hurt.”

Though his voice was casual, there was a coolness in his eyes as he spoke that Freya took careful note of as they passed by the now deserted theater hall. It looked like Zidane had truly been the

last one to leave the area. Likely the other hunters had gone off to chase bigger and better game. She wondered at his reasons until they were halfway to the station when a window opened on a second story of a nearby building and an old man leaned out, waving his arm enthusiastically.

“Thanks again, son!” he yelled. “I thought I was a goner. I’m rooting for you!”

Zidane waved an arm back but kept walking, his expression unchanged. Freya blinked at the old man, then hurried to catch up to the thief as he ascended the station stairs and thrust open the doors.

“Zidane, wait a moment,” she called and then almost barreled into him when he stopped abruptly and turned around. He jerked his thumb over at a nervous looking conductor standing next to a pair of stony faced guards.

“I’m heading to the Business District. I hear they’ve got hit the worst over there and so there should be plenty of points to be made.” His smile turned sly. “Wanna come with? I could use the company.”

He was deflecting and she had no idea as to why. After a moment’s hesitation, she took the bait. “I

suppose,” she said slowly as he turned and headed towards the train, her following him. ‘Although is that such a good idea for you?’ Her voice turned dry. “I am in the lead, apparently.”

He shrugged, patting his chest. “I’m not worried. You may have a jump height advantage, but I’m very fast.” They stepped on to the train with a nod from the conductor as he scurried onboard. After directing the man to head to the Business District, Zidane unhooked his butterfly sword and then threw himself into a seat, legs spread casually and arms over the seat backs, blade resting on his thighs.

Freya stayed standing as the door snicked closed behind her, and then the rumble of the car began to move again, this time at a more reasonable speed than before.

They stood in silence, Zidane’s gaze fixed firmly out the window, Freya’s staring stubbornly at his profile. “Are you all right?” she ventured at last.

Zidane glanced at her finally, eyes half-lidded, and for the life of her she did not have a clue as to what was going on in his brain. He was a blank slate wiped clean of fingerprints. At first she thought he would say nothing, just resume his vacant stare out

the window. But then he breathed out a deep sigh, face flattening.

“I hate this tournament,” he said finally, and she blinked at the scorn in his tone. She wondered suddenly if it had been there all along, if she’d only just listened closely. ‘All these idiots come from all over to try to test their skills for what, the bragging rights to call themselves the best? And against what, an artificial test concocted by some psycho up in the castle wanting to up the ante over the last?’ He shook his head slowly, then slouched in his chair. “It gets crazier every year and nobody objects. They just eat it up, all of them.”

Freya didn’t know what to say. It was not that she didn’t agree with the sentiment, having herself been alarmed when she’d seen stragglers still out in the streets. But at his words she’d thought of Fratley and words failed her, eyes lowering to the floor.

After a moment, Zidane shifted to prop his elbows on his knees. He was looking at her, but now she was avoiding his gaze. “I don’t mean you, Freya,” he said softly. “I know you aren’t like that.”

She let out a long hiss of a breath. “There is no need to coddle me, Zidane. I hear your point and I take your censure.” She looked out the window, and

then admitted, “I do not enjoy the tournament either. Sure, to be called Master Hunter would be pleasing to me, but it does not aid me in my search anymore than my erstwhile title of Dragoon can.”

Zidane ran a thumb over the blade in his lap, eyes lowered under a fan of lashes. “Then why do you keep coming back every year?” he said lightly, and yet she was not fooled. He must know what he was asking, but then he had given her one of his truths. It was only fair to return the favor.

Freya glanced up at the ceiling, a grim smile on her mouth as she contemplated his question. Why? Why do anything in this god forsaken world? There was only ever one reason why.

“Because I can’t help myself,” she said, meeting his eyes. An icy blue similar to Fratley’s, though in reality nothing like his at all. Like comparing sundown to sunset, or the deepest ocean to the far reaches of the sky. They were not better or worse, just different. “Because this was the last place in the world I remember being happy, and even a shadow is better than nothing at all.”

Zidane winced, head lowering. Freya glanced at the conductor, who looked like he was contemplating throwing himself out a window at the

atmosphere. Then she moved to the seat next to Zidane, waiting patiently for him to move his blade, and then sat down with a thump.

“You better hope I win our bet,” Freya said, propping her chin in her hand. Zidane glanced at her, curious. “Imagine what kind of scintillating conversations we’ll have on our date, otherwise.”

Zidane blinked, and then barked a laugh, his mouth crooking lopsided at the corner. “You amaze me, Freya,” he said, and the honest admiration made her shift uncomfortably. ‘I’m quite looking forward to our date, actually. Besides, you should know better by now. I can carry a conversation just fine on my own.’ He winked. “You can be the eye-candy.”

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